

Siege of Charleston - Conflict & Dates:

The Siege of Charleston took place from March 29 to May 12, 1780, during the American Revolution (1775-1783).

Armies & Commanders

Americans

- Major General Benjamin Lincoln
- Commodore Abraham Whipple
- 5,500 men

British

- Lieutenant General Sir Henry Clinton
- rising to 10,000-14,000 men

Siege of Charleston - Background:

In 1779, Lieutenant General Sir Henry Clinton began making plans for an attack on the Southern colonies. This was largely encouraged by a belief that Loyalist support in the region was strong and would facilitate its recapture. Clinton had attempted to capture Charleston, SC in June 1776, however the mission failed when Admiral Sir Peter Parker's naval forces were repulsed by fire from Colonel William Moultrie's men at Fort Sullivan (later Fort Moultrie). The first move of the new British campaign was the capture of Savannah, GA.

Arriving with a force of 3,500 men, Lieutenant Colonel Archibald Campbell took the city without a fight on December 29, 1778. French and American forces under Major General Benjamin Lincoln laid siege to the city on September 16, 1779. Assaulting the British works a month later, Lincoln's men were repulsed and the siege failed. On December 26, 1779, Clinton left 15,000 men under General Wilhelm von Knyphausen in New York to hold General George Washington's army at bay and sailed south with 14 warships and 90 transports for another attempt on Charleston.

These contained an expeditionary force of around 8,500 men.

Siege of Charleston - Coming Ashore:

Shortly after putting to sea, Clinton's fleet was beset by a series of intense storms which scattered his ships. Regrouping off Tybee Roads, Clinton landed a small diversionary force in Georgia before sailing north with the bulk of the fleet to Edisto Inlet approximately 30 miles south of Charleston. Unwilling to attempt forcing the harbor as in 1776, he ordered his army to begin landing on Simmons Island on February 11 and planned to approach the city by an overland route. Three days later British forces advanced on Stono Ferry but withdrew upon spotting American troops.

Returning the next day, they found the ferry abandoned. Fortifying the area, they pressed on towards Charleston and crossed to James Island. In late February, Clinton's men skirmished with American forces led by Chevalier Pierre-François Vernier and Lieutenant Colonel Francis Marion. Through the rest of the month and into early March, the British wrested control of James Island and captured Fort Johnson which guarded the southern approaches to Charleston harbor. On March 10, Clinton's second in command, Major General Lord Charles Cornwallis crossed to the mainland with British forces (Map).

Siege of Charleston - American Preparations:

While Clinton's army approached, Lincoln worked to prepare Charleston to withstand a siege. He was aided in this by Governor John Rutledge who ordered 600 slaves to construct new fortifications across the neck between the Ashley and Cooper Rivers. This was fronted by a defensive canal. Only possessing 1,100 Continentals and 2,500 militia, Lincoln lacked the numbers to face Clinton in the field. Supporting the army were four Continental Navy ships under Commodore Abraham Whipple as well as four South Carolina Navy vessels and two French ships.

Not believing he could defeat the Royal Navy in the harbor, Whipple first withdraw his squadron

behind a log boom which protected the entrance to the Cooper River before later transferring their guns to the land defenses and scuttling his ships. In addition, Lincoln would be reinforced on April 7 by the arrival of 1,500 Virginia Continentals which raised his total strength to 5,500. The arrival of these men was offset by British reinforcements under Lord Rawdon which increased Clinton's army to between 10,000-14,000. In mid-March, British forces began moving up the Ashley River and secured the southern bank.

Siege of Charleston - The City Invested:

Having been reinforced, Clinton crossed the Ashley under the cover of fog on March 29. Advancing on the Charleston defenses, the British began constructing siege lines on April 2. Two days later, the British constructed redoubts to protect the flanks of their siege line while also working to pull a small warship across the neck to the Cooper River. On April 8, the British fleet ran past the guns of Fort Moultrie and entered the harbor. Despite these setbacks, Lincoln retained contact with the outside via the north shore of the Cooper River (Map).

With the situation rapidly decaying, Rutledge escaped the city on April 13. Moving to completely isolate the city, Clinton ordered Lieutenant Colonel Banastre Tarleton to take a force to sweep away Brigadier General Isaac Huger's small command at Monck's Corner to the north. Attacking on April 14, Tarleton routed the Americans. With the loss of this crossroads, Clinton secured the north bank of the Cooper River. Understanding the severity of the situation, Lincoln parleyed with Clinton on April 21 and offered to evacuate the city if his men were permitted to depart.

With the enemy trapped, Clinton immediately refused this request. Following this meeting, a massive artillery exchange ensued. On April 24, American forces sortied against the British siege lines but to little effect. Five days later, the British began operations against the dam that held the water in the defensive canal. Heavy fighting began as the Americans sought to protect the dam. Despite their best efforts, it was nearly drained by May 6 opening the way for a British assault.

Lincoln's situation further worsened when Fort Moultrie fell to British forces. On May 8, Clinton demanded that the Americans unconditionally surrender. Refusing, Lincoln again attempted to negotiate for an evacuation.

Again denying this request, Clinton began a heavy bombardment the following day. Continuing into the night, the British pounded the American lines. This, coupled with the use of hot shot a few days later, which set several buildings on fire, broke the spirit of the city's civic leaders who began pressing Lincoln to surrender. Seeing no other option, Lincoln contacted Clinton on May 11 and marched out of the city to surrender the following day.

Siege of Charleston - Aftermath

The defeat at Charleston was a disaster for American forces in the South and saw the elimination of the Continental Army in the region. In the fighting, Lincoln lost 92 killed and 148 wounded, and 5,266 captured. The surrender at Charleston ranks as the US Army's third largest surrender behind the Fall of Bataan (1942) and Battle of Harpers Ferry (1862). British casualties before Charleston numbered 76 killed and 182 wounded. Departing Charleston for New York in June, Clinton turned over command at Charleston to Cornwallis who quickly began establishing outposts across the interior.

In the wake of the city's loss, Tarleton inflicted another defeat on the Americans at Waxhaws on May 29. Scrambling to recover, Congress dispatched the victor of Saratoga, Major General Horatio Gates, south with fresh troops. Rashly advancing, he was routed by Cornwallis at Camden in August. The American situation in the southern colonies did not begin stabilize until the arrival of Major General Nathanael Greene that fall.